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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000029

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [ECON](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SADR SURPRISES BASRAH, CALLS FOR NATIONAL UNITY, EXPULSION
OF OCCUPIERS

REF: A) BASRAH 19, B) BASRAH 27

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BASRAH, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In an unannounced visit to Basrah, Moqtada al Sadr made a televised statement at the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) headquarters. His speech called for Sunnis and Shias to unite and force the expulsion of the occupiers. An explosion in the Imam Ali Mosque in Basrah occurred shortly after Moqtada's speech. Basrah's population, frustrated by fuel shortages and terrified by extrajudicial kidnappings and assassinations, is receptive to his message. End Summary.

Sadr's Speech Draws Ten Thousand

¶2. (U) In an unannounced visit to Basrah, Moqtada al Sadr made a televised statement at the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) headquarters. Over ten thousand people were reported to have attended the 15-minute speech. Al Iraqiya Television in Basrah filmed the speech and broadcast it almost immediately. In a loud, authoritative voice, Sadr called on Sunnis and Shia to unite and fight off the occupiers, and the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel in particular. He equated these three countries to Satan, and the crowd chanted, "No, no to Satan," in response. He said that fighting off the occupation must be done "in fact," not just in words, urging for action. Once the occupiers are removed from Iraq, he stated, security would follow. He referred to his father, the cleric Mohammed Sadiq al Sadr, in saying that by uniting, Iraqis could defeat their enemies. The crowd chanted, "Leave, leave, occupiers," in unison.

¶3. (SBU) After stirring up Basrah with his firebrand speech, Moqtada was reported to be holding a private meeting at a Sunni Mosque in Basrah. He is expected to leave Basrah either later on February 26 or early on February 27 to attend a national unity procession on February 27 in Baghdad. His means of transportation and departure time from Basrah are unknown.

Governor Mohammed's Duplicity

¶4. (C) Clearly visible standing behind Moqtada's right shoulder was the Governor of Basrah, Mohammed Waeli (Fadillah Party). Governor Mohammed contacted the REO from Baghdad on February 25, requesting transportation back to Basrah. The REO facilitated transport for him back to Basrah later on February

25 on a British Royal Air Force (RAF) flight. A boycott on cooperation and communication with the British by all Basrah government officials has been in place since Chairman Muhammed Sa'adoon Al Abaadi (Da'awa) signed an official letter on February 13 (see reftel A). By accepting RAF transport, Governor Mohammed acted in clear violation of the boycott. His need to get back to Basrah in time for Moqtada's visit is now clear.

Concurrent Explosion in Shia Imam Ali Mosque

15. (SBU) A bomb exploded in the Shi Imam Ali Mosque in central Basrah a few minutes after Sadr concluded his speech. The mosque is located about a mile away from the OMS headquarters where Moqtada delivered his speech. The mosque is under construction and not being used for prayer at the time. Reports of 2 deaths and 3 injuries as a result of the bomb were delivered to the REO, although this information has not been verified. Only construction workers were reported to be in the mosque when the explosion occurred, and the Iraqi police are investigating the event. The bomb is reported to have gone off in the bathroom of the mosque, and police were reported as saying they believe that the injured men were responsible for planting the bomb.

Basrah Runs Out of Gas

16. (SBU) Following demonstrations with large numbers of participants on February 22, 23, and 24, an eerie calm settled on Basrah on February 25 as fuel shortages hamstrung the local population's ability to move around the city. With black market prices for fuel at 1000 dinars a liter, few people in Basrah can afford to travel. The wait at fuel stations in Basrah is reported to be over 8 hours. Moqtada's visit to Basrah is particularly timely, as Basrah's residents frustrations at the local government's inability to provide basic services are amplified by the fuel shortages. (Note: The South Oil Company

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Refinery is conducting maintenance on its pipelines, resulting in the reduction in fuel supplies to Basrah. Maintenance is scheduled to last for two weeks. End Note.)

Kidnappings and Assassinations Continue Unabated

17. (SBU) At 2000 on February 25, a confrontation broke out at a police checkpoint between the Iraqi Police (IP) and vehicles carrying individuals claiming to be part of the Serious Crimes Unit (SCU). Dead bodies were reported to have been in the SCU vehicles. When IP attempted to arrest the SCU members, a firefight broke out that lasted until 0200 on February 26. No one was killed or injured in the fight, and all SCU members escaped. The IP identified Captain Hashim Khadim Hashim, who is alleged to have been behind the kidnapping of 12 prisoners from the Al Mina prison on February 23 (see reftel B) as being in one of the SCU vehicles.

18. (C) At least seven individuals were reported to have been kidnapped and assassinated in the last 24 hours in Basrah. These individuals include both Sunni and Shia. At this time, there is no indication that the increase in kidnappings and assassinations in Basrah over the past week are directly linked to either the destruction of the Samarra Mosque or to Moqtada's visit. The number of kidnappings and assassinations in Basrah have increased significantly since January. REO Basrah has received reports of assassination lists of Sunnis, Ba'athists, and Shia sympathizers, with attacks being carried out by Iranian-influenced extremists. If this is indeed the case, it is likely that the assassins are taking advantage of the curfew and the general disorder in Basrah in the days following the Samarra Mosque attack to step up their attacks.

OMS Ascending?

¶9. (C) Comment: Moqtada's surprise visit to Basrah should not come as a surprise. Following his high-level meetings in Middle East capitals, his appearance in the Shia heartland of southern Iraq in the strategically significant city of Basrah, where Sunnis make up about 20 percent of the population, was the logical next step in his strategy of uniting Sunnis and Shia against the "common enemy" of the Coalition. Moqtada is capitalizing on the past week's chaos following the destruction of the Samarra mosque by painting himself as the only political figure able to unite all Iraqis and provide adequate security. In Basrah, the OMS- militia of Jayish Al Mahdi has allegedly been "protecting" Sunni mosques and shrines since the Samarra Mosque explosion on February 22.

¶10. (C) Comment Continued: The presence of the Basrah Governor at Moqtada's televised speech indicates an attempt on the Governor's part to distance himself from the policies of the Da'awa-led Basrah Provincial Council. Even moderate, educated Iraqis in Basrah not normally receptive to Moqtada's ideas are increasingly upset with the dysfunctional Provincial Council and its endless and ineffective boycotts against the British. Moqtada's meeting with Sunni leaders in a Sunni Mosque sends a signal that he is willing to work with all segments of the population. While Moqtada generally does not have a favorable reputation in Basrah, most of Basrah's residents see few viable alternatives. REO moderate contacts comment that while they do not like Moqtada's party, they do not see a way to stop his political ascension. End Comment

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